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ABSTRACT

A historical review of the background of the theories and observations of Marshall McLuhan demonstrates that these ideas arose from or were first articulated by several antecedent social scientists. Some of McLuhan's ideas arise directly from the linguistic observations of Benjamin Lee Whorf. Other ideas show signs of having been influenced by Buckminster Fuller and Walter Ong in the area of the extension of human sensory systems through the use of machines and electronic media. Most especially, however, McLuhan's postulations are rooted in other social scientists such as Cooley, Mead, and Simmel. Along with McLuhan, these scholars have regarded communication as the integral aspect in man's adaptation to social change. This theoretical communicational base, along with his variations and refinements of earlier work, are what make McLuhan's work so important to those who seek to understand social, symbol-making man. (CH)

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THE SOCIAL ANCESTRY OF MARSHALL McLUHAN'S THEORIES

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THE SOCIAL ANCESTRY OF MARSHALL McLUHAN'S THEORIES

Most students of the humanities and the social sciences have met the concepts of Marshall McLuhan in their readings. The widely published English professor and theorist has advanced seemingly novel concepts relating to communication and society, however, few scholars realize the extent to which these concepts have roots in the writings of others. Benjamin Lee Whorf might find an expansion of his linguistic relativity hypothesis in McLuhan's books,[1] Buckminster Fuller might find similarities between McLuhan's ideas on human sensory extension and his own,[2] and Walter Ong might find the same similarities.[3]

Fewer scholars realize that McLuhan has also updated the theories of early social scientists. In fact, a review of some prominent similarities between the writings of McLuhan and early social theorists reveals a continuity of social thought from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. This paper addresses itself to the social foundations of McLuhan's concepts. The paper will credit early social theorists with rather McLuhanesque insights and, in turn, will credit McLuhan with several expansions of social theory.

The following lines introduce Marshall McLuhan's first chapter in Understanding Media:

> In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of

> control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - results from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extention of ourselves or by any new technology.[4]

This quotation gives us several bits of information about McLuhan's book in particular as well as his theoretical perspective in general. Among other things, it tells that communication is integral to the social process; it tells that communication has personal and psychological consequences; and it tells us that, somehow, communication extends man's senses.

The quotation does not tell us that these concepts predated McLuhan by 50 years. The early symbolic interactionists held that man's interaction with other men shaped the individual and in turn, the social system. Simmel, Cooley, and Mead regarded a communication process as central to social interaction or social reciprocity. They also offer descriptions of the personal and psychological consequences of communication and the extensions of man's senses through communication media.

Communication plays a central role in the symbolic interactionist school of social philosophy. This school holds that humans respond to each other on the bases of intentions of gestures which, consequently, take on a symbolic role. A rudimentary form of this behavior takes place when one individual completes the incomplete act of another in his imagination. Thus individual A walks into the office, says, "Good morning; how are . . ." and pauses. The listener imaginatively completes the act and adds a "you" to the incomplete verbalization. The listener adds

"you" because he has the ability to adopt the role of the speaker and respond to the incomplete act as the speaker responds to his own incomplete act.

Mention of response to communication leads to the second dimension of symbolic interactionism, that is reaction of the individual to his own communication. Mead argues that the communication act must arouse in the sender the same response it stimulates in the receiver as a prerequisite for its existence.[5] The symbolic interactionists carry this line of reasoning farther and emphasize the distinction between the form and content as McLuhan does at a later date.

McLuhan's words, quoted above, reflect his view that communciation plays an integral role in social interaction. His view reflects Cooley's position that communication enables social interaction:

> The social phase of the process takes place through the medium of psychical communication, the vehicle being language, in the widest sense of the word, including writing, printing and every means of transmission of thought.[6]

Simmel states the relationship between language, communication, and society even more succinctly in the following passage:

> Human interaction is normally based on the fact that the ideational words of men have certain elements in common, that objective intellectual contents constitute the material which is transformed into subjective life by means of man's social relations. This type, as well as the essential instrument of these common elements is shared language.[7]

Cooley and Simmel, as did McLuhan at a later date, regarded communication as central to social life.

Communication, whether it be by McLuhan's electronic media or Cooley's print media, serves as the vehicle for environmental influences on our lives[8] and reflects the diverse nature of environments. The forms and contents of these environments influence individuals differently through communication. Simmel compares the influence of the rural environment to the urban environment. The rural environment leaves: "lasting impressions, impressions which vary only slightly from one another, impressions which take a regular and habitual course and show regular and habitual contrasts . . .[9] while "the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions . . .[10] forces the metropolitan individual to adopt a psychological structure that differs from that of his cousin the the country. In S-R terms, the intensification of nervous stimulation, or as McLuhan might say, the greater the sensory bombardment, found in the urban environment, results in swift and uninterrupted change in inner and outer stimuli of the individual.[11]

Cooley agrees that communication changes the inner stimuli of men and goes so far as to say that communication causes man's conscious life. He encodes the proposition in these words:

> We see that communication, including its organization into literature, art and institutions is truly the outside or visible structure of thought, as much cause as effect of the inside conscious life of men.[12]

This happens by means of the symbolic interaction of man and his environment by means of communication:

> All is one growth, the symbols and the traditions are projected from the mind to be sure, but in the very instant of their projection, and thereafter, they react upon it and in a sense control it, stimulating development, and fixing certain thoughts at the expense of others to which no awakening suggestion comes.[13]

Cooley fails to elaborate on the aspects of the communication act which influence the individual.

One might next ask what part of the communication act actually influences the individual? Simmel, as does McLuhan, views social interaction and communication as containing two distinct elements, form and content. In Simmel's words: "social content includes everything that one may find in the form of impulse, intent, or purpose."[14] Outside the individual, form takes the guise of medium. Simmel compares two social media, life style and money, in respect to their influence on our psychological processes:

> If it is true that the predominant style influences our way of viewing nature, then the quantifiably definable superstructures of monetary relations above the quantitative actuality must influence strongly our ways of viewing actuality.[15]

The print, radio, television and film media act in similar fashions. Referring to contemporary media, McLuhan explains that: "electric technology (of television) transcends classified semantic data (of print) in favor of pattern recognition of syntactical structures."[16] Thus, the television viewer must add a pattern to the grey dots and form an image from the 525 dots of eleven shades of grey he perceives, while the print user receives his information in a linear, sequential, visual manner. McLuhan holds that the television viewer and the print user will tend to extend these perceptual and cognitive organization ratios of the two media to non-television and non-print ex-

periences. Simmel and McLuhan agree that each medium possesses its own sense ratio.

Each medium also extends our senses. McLuhan explains that "all media are extensions of some human faculty, psychic or physical."[17] On the physical level, the book serves an extension of the eye, the wheel serves as an extension of the foot, and the electronic media serve as extensions of the central nervous system. Again one can find related concepts in Cooley's and Simmel's writings. Simmel claims that man does not end with the limits of his body. Positing a summation model, Simmel claims that man's extensions equal the sum of effects emanating from him in the dimensions of time and space.[18] Cooley expands Simmel's position when he claims that new expansions of man's senses in the mass media enlarge and animate social relations. This happens, he argues, since new media allow language and the social institutions based upon it to extend in their scope.[19]

One may justly conclude that McLuhan's theories enjoy a solid footing in the theories of early social scientists. The paper has established that each of the four men discussed, McLuhan, Cooley, Mead, and Simmel, have regarded communication as integral to the adaption of man to the social process. All agree that communication serves a mediation function, and, while mediating, influences the individual using the medium. This influence has psychological and sociological dimensions, that is, the communication process affects the interior processes of the individual at the same time it serves as his extension.

McLuhan has revitalized and updated some early and basic soc-

iological principles. Through his numerous illustrations and analogies, the early theories enjoy new life and, indeed, the old content has taken on a new form. McLuhan has applied the old symbolic interactionist principles to the newer electronic media as well as expanded symbolic interactionist views of print and speech. The results possess whatever reliability and validity the older theories enjoyed as well as a certain amount of intuitive validity.

NOTES

[1]B. L. Whorf, Language Thought and Reality: Selected Writings, ed., J. B. Carroll (New York: Wiley, 1956).

[2]R. Buckminster Fuller, J. Meel, and Q. Fiore, I Seem to be a Verb (New York: Bantam, 1970).

[3]W. Ong, S. J., In the Human Grain: Further Explorations of Contemporary Culture (New York: MacMillan, 1967).

[4]H. M. McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p.7.

[5]G. H. Mead, Selected Writings, ed., A. J. Reck (New York: The Free Press, 1964), p. 312.

[6]C. H. Cooley, Social Process (New York: Scribners, 1922, p. 198).

[7]Georg Simmel, The Sociology of Georg Simmel, ed., K. H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1969), p. 315.

[8]Cooley, p. 179-8.

[9]Simmel, p. 410.

[10]Ibid., p. 410.

[11]Ibid., p. 410.

[12]Cooley, p. 64.

[13]Ibid., p. 64.

[14]Nicholas J. Spykman, The Social Theory of Georg Simmel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1925), p. 33.

[15]Ibid., p. 326.

[16]M. McLuhan, "The Relation of Environment to Anti-Environment," in The Human Dialogue: Perspectives on Communication, eds., F. W. Watson and A. Montague (New York: The Free Press, 1967), pp. 39-40.

[17]M. McLuhan and Q. Fiore, The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 26.

[18]Simmel, p. 419.

[19]Ibid., p. 419.